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Nearly 200 people heard veterans speak with intensity and conviction about the important work of the U.S. armed forces during last week's Veterans Day celebration in Buffalo Grove.

Wearing the Medal of Honor he received for heroic action during the Vietnam War, Allen J. Lynch stressed how Americans should appreciate the freedoms they enjoy and the people who protect those freedoms for them.

"We owe every one of our freedoms to those who served in the armed forces and those who are on active duty," said Lynch. "It's not the elected officials who get us freedom, it's the veterans. It's not the religious leaders who get us freedom, it's the veterans."

Lynch, who lives in Gurnee and heads the Illinois Attorney General's Veterans Rights Bureau, said the Nov. 2 election was one example of that freedom.

"About (two) week(s) ago, we all went to the polls," Lynch said. "Some people were very happy with the outcome of the election ... some aren't." But unlike other countries where political violence is common, terrorists with automatic assault weapons are not "shooting up" the Republican or Democratic headquarters in the United States, he said. "Everyone had the opportunity to go and voice their opinion in that polling place because freedom reigns in America."

Spread the word

Lynch urged the veterans in the room to visit schools and talk to children about how America's freedoms have been protected.

"Explain our Bill of Rights to them," Lynch said. "Explain what a constitutional democracy is. Explain to them it doesn't come cheap. It's bought with the blood of patriots."

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, who is also a Navy Reserve intelligence officer, spoke as a veteran who has seen combat and felt "the sacred moment when you put on the nation's uniform." That was a moment of pride, Kirk said. But during one of his first combat missions, he felt fear, too, when he and three other servicemen were flying over the Turkish border into Iraq. Kirk mistook the anti-aircraft fire ahead for stormy weather.

"I said, 'It looks like we're going to hit some weather,' " he recalled.

One of his companions, as Kirk told it, replied, "That's not weather, you idiot, that's flak."

"A chill went down my spine because I realized they were shooting at us," Kirk said. But his next realization was that the role of the serviceman in Iraq was an honorable one. "I thought if I died this morning, it's OK, because the cause is worth it," Kirk said.

The Veterans Day ceremony, organized by the Buffalo Grove Park District and held at the Alcott Center, included the posting of the colors by the U.S. Marine Corps, the playing of taps and "The Star Spangled Banner" by four "brass ambassadors" from the U.S. Navy Band at the Great Lakes Naval Station, and a moment of silent prayer for deceased members of the U.S. armed forces.

Many people were touched by the patriotic words not of a veteran, but of a 13-year-old girl.

Karen Larson-Meadows, president of the Park District Board and an art teacher at Plum Grove Junior High School in Rolling Meadows, read a poem written by one of her students, Courtney Tuegel, after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The verses included, "Freedom is willing to fight overseas for the price of Freedom has never been free. It's Marines and soldiers crouched in a foxhole, a nation banded together in a common goal."

Larson-Meadows, whose 27-year-old son is an Army helicopter pilot for medical evacuations stationed outside Baghdad and whose husband is serving in the Reserves at Fort Sheridan, told the veterans and their families, "I am with you 100 percent."

'Love my country'

Thomas Kajohn Jr., another Buffalo Grove veteran, attended the celebration with his wife, Jeri. Both said the speeches and poems conveyed the importance of the holiday.

"I'm a flag-waver and a devout American," said Thomas Kajohn. "Sometimes I don't like my government, but I love my country. And I wouldn't be scared to go back and do what I did in the Korean War."

Arnie and Cathy Rothenbaum and their three children came to share the day with Arnie's father, Eugene Rothenbaum, who served in the Army Air Force during World War II.

"The speeches made you really reflect how we came to our freedom and what it costs to keep our freedom," said Cathy Rothenbaum.

All the veterans who attended the ceremony received a certificate of appreciation in recognition of their service and sacrifice. However, Eugene Rothenbaum, a member of the Jewish War Veterans Post 89 in Buffalo Grove, said, "My family being here with me" was the most meaningful part of the day.

Rothenbaum's grandson, 11-year-old Nathan, thought Kirk's speech was the most interesting, especially his remarks about seeing flak, which Nathan described as "giant shrapnel from anti-aircraft cannons."

Lisa Durfey attended the celebration with her two daughters in honor of all their relatives who have served this country, from a brother who is an Army colonel scheduled to land in Iraq on

Christmas Eve, to her grandmother who served in the Navy in World War I.

Emily Durfey, 13, said her class at Cooper Middle School in Buffalo Grove just finished studying World War I and Veterans Day.

"Freedom is more than just the word for me," Emily said. "It means we don't have to live in fear, we can say anything we want to, practice any religion we want to, because of the sacrifices people have made for us, especially our veterans."